



Why am I being harassed by crows in late spring and how do I cope?

- The period between ~June 1 and ~June 20 is the peak of the yearly period in which nestling crows are reaching the point where they are ready (or not quite ready but they don't know it) to leave the nest. Below is a primer on what is happening in your local crow's nest during this time and how to cope when things go amiss.

At age 27-34 days: Nestlings perch on nest edge, spend a lot of time flapping their wings and gradually begin perching and moving about in tree branches near (often above) nest. At this stage we call them "*branchers*." They typically begin begging aloud to be fed (a repetitive, insistent, distinctively pleading call—any mom will recognize it immediately). This is a dangerous time as there is relatively little "safety net" of branches around and below many nest trees in the city. A major misjudgment (or several minor ones) by a healthy brancher or a poor jump by a weakling can put it on the ground all too easily. Unless rescued (see below), any kid on the ground downtown is typically a dead kid.

At age 31-37 days: Depending on the nest site, a fledgling actually takes wing over open ground. Again, this is a critical point, especially Downtown. For nests in wide canopy trees or in tree clusters, this move is often delayed for a week, giving fledgling ample time to gain strength and judgment. For those stuck with some combination of low nest, narrow tree crown, a row of street trees or an isolated nest tree, the risk goes WAY up. The young bird is instinctively capable of perfect, if pedestrian, horizontal flight but judging distance or a landing is another matter. And even if perfectly healthy, it is not yet strong enough to fly far or gain altitude sharply. Healthy/lucky fledglings will make a short, quasi-horizontal flight into a near neighbor tree where they will hang out for up to a day or so. They will then repeat this move over several days near the nest tree, gradually gaining strength and judgment. Flights rapidly become more frequent, stronger, and longer. Within a few more days this first great

hurdle is passed—the bird (now called a juvenile) is successfully fledged and will spend the rest of the summer exploring the nearby territory with its sibs, mooching from its parents and learning “the ropes” (like avoiding cars, windows, gulls, etc). Unlucky or weak fledglings will quickly wind up on the ground near the nest tree where most will perish.

What happens when a late stage nestling or early stage fledgling winds up on or near the ground? Panicked, protective crow parents and seemingly persecuted, certainly puzzled, and often annoyed or even frightened human pedestrians is what happens. You may have experienced this. Occasionally, inexperienced parents with low nests may caw or even swoop at people when their kids become “branchers” near the nest, but this is uncommon and short lived if all goes well. More typically, frantic non-stop cawing from near the nest tree and silent “dive-bombing” of passing humans from behind is a sign of a crow kid on or very near the ground and lacking the wing strength to get back up. The closer a person comes to the young bird’s location, the more frantic the parents’ cawing becomes and the more likely and more daring the swooping becomes. There is typically about a 10 day window during the late nestling-fledging stages when this situation may occur. It rarely lasts more than a few days can be dealt with in two ways.

1. ***For hapless humans trying to mind their own business:*** Raising an arm straight above head (to make you appear taller) as they pass through “critical area” will always keep dive bombing parents at an acceptable distance. Without raised hand, the frantic parents will often come close enough for people to feel the wind of their wings. Nevertheless many parent crows will avoid so close an approach and most (alas not all) will avoid actually making contact. Even for the most desperate parents, contact is nearly always a slap with the feet—startling but harmless. Strikes with the beak do occur (e.g., watch out for the exceptionally bold male at 6th & Union) but are very rare. Finally, *I have found that for most folks, a simple explanation of the reason for the crows’ behavior produces a big change for the better in how they deal with it.* A sign posted near fledging time helps a lot.
2. ***For those willing to attempt to defuse the situation:*** put on a hat and if you like, a pair of light gloves, locate, capture (a large towel can help here), and check out the downed kid (e.g. can it flap both wings, is it obviously damaged in some way). Then if it’s old enough (well feathered and nearly as big as its parents) jump-start it (i.e., gently toss it underhanded from the highest place accessible) toward a nearby (~10-30 feet) well branched tree. Remember that a healthy fledgling has little ability to gain altitude, but can fly reasonably well (if not far) horizontally. Sometimes it takes two or three attempts to get the bird to actually land in a tree and stay there. Sometimes jump-starting a downed but seemingly healthy fledgling doesn’t work, but often it does.

Place a smaller (younger) nestling or injured fledgling in the branches on the ground in a less traveled area, preferably with good cover and let its parents and nature resolve the issue (or take it to PAWS, etc). The parents will go absolutely crazy while you are pursuing and handling the kid but as before will rarely make contact and will quickly calm down once the kid is up and/or away from people, cars, dogs, and pussycats.

Source: Dr. R. Reineke, University of Washington College of Forest Resources See <http://courses.washington.edu/vseminar/main.htm>